

May 17, 2007

Contact: Robin Winchell (202) 225-4031

**WASHINGTON, D.C.** - U.S. Rep. Charlie Melancon voted today in support of legislation that will make the National Guard better prepared to respond to future natural disasters, such as hurricanes. Provisions in the FY 2008 Defense Authorization Bill (H.R. 1585) authorize an additional \$1 billion for National Guard and Reserve equipment to address the shortfall caused by our ongoing commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan. The bill also will require evaluation and reporting on the preparedness of the National Guard for homeland missions, such as disaster response.

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Army readiness has dropped to levels not seen since the 1970s, and Army National Guard units have only 56 percent of their required equipment, the lowest levels since the Sept. 11, 2001. Many stateside units are not fully equipped and would not be considered ready if called upon to respond during an emergency, such as another major hurricane.

**"America has the finest military in the world, and this bill provides them the support and funding they need to remain the strongest,"** said Rep. Melancon. **"Under the bill, our troops will get better health care, better pay, and the benefits they have earned. Additionally, we are also making sure the National Guard has the equipment it needs to be fully prepared to respond to the next natural disaster. As we saw after Katrina and Rita, the National Guard plays a critical role in aiding disaster victims. With hurricane season fast approaching, we must make sure the Guard always has what it needs to**

**help and protect American citizens."**

In total, the FY 2008 Defense Authorization Bill authorizes \$503.8 billion in budget authority for the Department of Defense (DoD) and the national security programs of the Department of Energy (DoE), and \$141.8 billion to support ongoing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan during fiscal year 2008.

In addition to the National Guard provisions, the bill focuses on the military's critical readiness needs to support our troops in the field, enable our nation to meet immediate military requirements, and preserve our ability to deter and respond to future threats. It also gives troops a pay raise, strengthens benefits for the troops and their families as promised in the GI Bill of Rights for the 21st Century, and takes vital steps forward in improving military health care, responding to the Walter Reed scandal.

This measure will also provide the necessary resources and authorities to quickly and efficiently reverse declining trends in training and equipment readiness, and will also provide our service members doing their duty overseas in multiple wars with the best gear and force protection possible.

Rep. Melancon added, **"I will continue to support our troops by making sure our military is fully prepared for threats and challenges world wide and that our troops get the benefits they deserve and have earned."**

Specifically, the FY 2008 Defense Authorization Bill does the following:

## **I. Readiness Initiatives to Strengthen our Military**

### **Establish Strategic Readiness Fund**

- Creates a \$1 billion Strategic Readiness Fund to give the Department of Defense the ability to rapidly address equipment shortfalls.
- Establishes a Defense Readiness Production Board to identify critical readiness requirements and to mobilize the defense industrial base to speed up the production of military equipment

### **Build up the Strained National Guard.**

- Provides \$1 billion for National Guard and Reserve equipment to address the shortfall.
- Gives the National Guard enhanced authorities to fulfill its expanded role in the nation's defense, by authorizing a fourth star for the Chief of the National Guard Bureau, and making the National Guard Bureau a joint activity of the Department of Defense.
- Requires evaluation and reporting on the preparedness of the National Guard for homeland missions, such as disaster response.

### **Provide Needed Military Equipment & Training for our Troops.**

- Authorizes \$13.6 billion for the Army and \$8.4 billion for the Marine Corps to address equipment reset requirements.
- Requires a plan on reconstitution of pre-positioned equipment stocks.
- Provides \$250 million to address training shortfalls department wide.

### **Improve Force Protection for our Troops.**

- Provides an additional \$4.1 billion for Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) Vehicles, which could reduce the casualties caused by improvised explosive devices by as much as 80 percent.
- Provides \$1.2 billion for personal body armor.
- Authorizes \$2.5 billion for up-armor humvee production and \$1.2 billion for vehicle add-on armor.

### **Expand the Number of Troops to Meet our Commitments and Reduce Strain.**

- Increases the size of the military by 36,000 Army troops and by 9,000 Marines.

## **II. Supporting our Troops & Their Families**

### **Give the Military a Pay Raise**

- Provides all service members a pay raise of 3.5 percent -- 0.5 percent more than the President's budget request, and provide special pays and bonuses.

### **Upgrade Military Health Care for our Troops & Military Retirees**

- Preserves health benefits by prohibiting fee increases in TRICARE and the TRICARE pharmacy program for service members and retirees.
- Take a variety of steps to improve health care:
  - o Includes the Wounded Warrior Assistance Act which responds to the Walter Reed scandal by improving the care of injured soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.
  - o Restores more than 2300 medical personnel positions and fully funds the Defense Health program facility maintenance, particularly at Walter Reed.
  - o Launches a Military Mental Health Initiative to coordinate all mental health research and development for the Department.
  - o Establishes a Traumatic Brain Injury Initiative to provide the opportunity for emerging technologies and treatments to compete for Defense Department funding.

**Strengthen Benefits for the Troops and their Families, as promised in the GI Bill of Rights for the 21st Century**

- Takes another step toward ending the Disabled Veterans Tax - which forces disabled military retirees to give up one dollar of their pension for every dollar of disability pay they receive. It expands the special compensation for combat-related disabled retirees who have served at least 15 years and have a 60 percent disability rating.
- Makes progress in ending the Military Families Tax, which unfairly penalizes the more than 60,000 survivors, most of them widows, of those who have died as a result of their service-connected injuries. Currently, these widows lose their survivor benefits if they also receive Dependency and Indemnity Compensation benefits (because their spouse died of a service-connected injury), but this measure establishes a special survivor indemnity allowance

to begin to address this tax.

### **III. War on Terrorism - Iraq Accountability, Afghanistan and Nuclear Threat Reduction**

#### **Greater Accountability in the Conduct of the War in Iraq.**

- Requires a detailed Defense Department report on the implementation of the Joint Campaign Plan for Iraq, on efforts made by the Iraqi government to achieve political reconciliation, and on the metrics being used to measure American efforts in Iraq, including the implications for U.S. force levels there.
- Expands the jurisdiction of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction.

#### **Strengthen the Conduct of the War in Afghanistan.**

- Requires a comprehensive Defense Department report that outlines the strategic direction of U.S. activities in Afghanistan and includes concrete performance indicators and measures of progress.
- Establishes a new Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

#### **Keeping Nuclear Weapons out of the Hands of Terrorists.**

- Increases funding to strengthen and expand the National Nuclear Security Administration's non-proliferation programs and the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) Program.